

5. A RECENT OBSERVATION OF WHITE-HEADED DUCK *OXYURA LEUCOCEPHALA* AT GAJALDOBA BARRAGE, WEST BENGAL, INDIA¹

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On February 03, 2006, while scanning a few thousand waterbirds at the Gajaldoba Barrage, Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal, India, we observed a female White-headed Duck *Oxyura leucocephala*, loosely associated with a large mixed group of anatids (mostly the Common Teal *Anas crecca* and the Gadwall *Anas strepera*, with smaller number of Northern Shoveller *Anas clypeata*, Northern Pintail *Anas acuta*, Eurasian Wigeon *Anas penelope*, Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*, Falcated Duck *Anas falcata*, Red-crested Pochard *Netta rufina*, Tufted Pochard *Aythya fuligula*, Common Pochard *Aythya ferina* and Ferruginous Pochard *Aythya nyroca*). The bird was easily identified by its typical shape with a long tail held in upright position, a large head and swollen-based bill, its uniformly rufous-brown body and the black and white head pattern. Sex identification was based on the extensive black cap reaching below the eye, off-white face with broad dark cheek-stripe and blackish bill.

Most of the time the White-headed Duck was not closely associated with other ducks but was observed swimming around busily in open water at the edge of the flock near to the dam. Although the bird was very active, it did not seem to be in a sound health condition as it was continuously opening its bill, giving the impression that it had respiratory problems.

Gajaldoba Barrage is an artificial wetland created by retaining the water of Teesta river. It is an important wintering and stopover site for migratory ducks and shorebirds, and has a considerable potential of attracting rare birds. Other significant species which were observed during two visits on January 15 and February 03, included the Black-necked Grebe *Podiceps nigricollis*, the Common Shelduck *Tadorna tadorna*, the Common Goldeneye *Bucephala clangula* and the White-

tailed Sea-Eagle *Haliaeetus albicilla*.

Discussion

The White-headed Duck is distributed in Central Asia and some parts of Europe. It is globally threatened and classified as Endangered by BirdLife International and IUCN (BirdLife International 2006). Its world population has decreased from probably over 100,000 individuals in the early 20th century to an estimated 19,000 in 1991, and has probably declined to less than 10,000 since (BirdLife International 2006). Main threats include the habitat loss in Central Asia, where approximately 50% of breeding habitat has been drained during the 20th century, pollution and recent droughts in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan (BirdLife International 2006). In the Indian subcontinent, the wintering population of the White-headed Duck is mainly restricted to Pakistan, where the number has dropped from 1,039 birds in 1968 to only 5-33 between 2002 and 2004 (Li and Mundkur 2003; Zulfiqar and Akhtar 2005; BirdLife International 2006). In India, the species is now very rarely recorded with only two observations since 1980: single birds at Harike Lake, Punjab, in 1984, and at Amakhera wetland, Uttar Pradesh, in 1997 (Li and Mundkur 2003). The present record of White-headed Duck from Gajaldoba Barrage is far east from its usual occurrence in South Asia. However, there are old specimens from Calcutta market, West Bengal, which have presumably been taken nearby (Rasmussen and Anderton 2005). In China, where the species is very rare, single birds have been observed as far east as Hunan and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (Li and Mundkur 2003). These records, as well as the recent observation from Gajaldoba Barrage, most likely refer to vagrants.

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